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CULTURE, HEALTH, AND ILLNESS IN KASHMIR

Khalida Jabeen, Tabish S.A.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Culture is a set of guidelines which individuals inherit as members of a particular society, and which tells them how to view the world, how to experience it emotionally, and how to behave in relation to other people, to supernatural forces, and to the natural environment.

Virtually all societies have more than one culture within their borders. A subdivision of culture within a complex society is seen in the various professional subcultures that exist. Cultural background has an important influence on many aspects of people's lives, including their beliefs, behaviours, perceptions, emotions, language, family structure, diet and attitudes to illness, pain, and other forms of misfortune, all of which may have important implications for health and healthcare.

Medical anthropology draws on the techniques and findings of medical science. In many cases, it is possible to link biological changes found by these techniques to social and cultural factors in a particular society.

Examples like rural and ignorant people see the diarrhea as a natural and expected part of the teething and growing up and not as illness; others explain infant diarrhea as due to certain folk illness such a nazar (evil eye), jinns (malevolent spirits) or sutt a sunken or fallen fontanelle, said to cause difficulty in infant sucking, which should be treated with traditional remedies, without recourse to ORT. A large number of diseases can be linked to dietary beliefs and practices, although these cultural factors are mainly relevant where enough food is available for nutrition in the first place. Attempts to modify or improve diets should therefore take into account the important cultural rules that food plays in all societies and cultural groups.

II. CARING & CURING

People suffering from physical discomfort or emotional distress have a number of ways of helping themselves or of seeking help from other people. There are three overlapping sectors of health care: the popular sector, the folk sector, and the professional sector.

Various practices of care and cure include traditional systems of healing, alternative medical care, faith healing (pirs and fakins), placebo analgesia, quacks like "Wattangur" (a person treating fractures by herbs and wooden sticks applied as splint) or use of Khalasmohar (a herb put in water expands for determining the third stage of labour and subsequent delivery), etc. Ritual has important social, psychological and symbolic dimensions. Rituals include calandrical rituals, rituals of social tradition, and rituals of misfortune.

In Kashmir there are rituals of pregnancy and childbirth rituals of death and mourning and rituals of hospitalisation that influence the health of people.

III. CULTURAL FACTORS IN EPIDEMIOLOGY

Cultural factors can be either casual, contributory or protective in their relation to ill-health. These factors include economic situation, family structure, gender roles, marriage patterns, child rearing practices, diet, personal hygiene, housing sanitation arrangement, occupations, self treatment strategies and lay therapies. An understanding of these factors can improve medical care and health education.

IV. EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

For various historical reasons, the beliefs and health practices of the northern Indian culture is originated from countries

* *Department of Hospital Administration, S.K University of Medical Sciences, Srinagar - 190 011*

including China, Japan, Korea, Iran, Philippines and other South Asian Countries. Out of all, Chinese Culture regarding health habits has a greater influence than any other single country.

The universe is believed to be composed of interacting entities. Energy for regulating the universe comes from opposing forces of Yin and Yung. Yin is the negative, dark, cold, empty force, whereas Yung is the positive, light, warm, full force. When an imbalance exists, an increase in the opposite force is needed to counterbalance it and restore equilibrium. This is strong belief among chinese and has influenced the people in northern Indian too including Jammu & Kashmir State. This Yin and Yung practice still exists in villages where 80% of our population live. Health is believed to result from equilibrium between the opposite forces of Yin and Yung and illness occurs when the balance is not maintained. Most of people believe this illness can be cured by proper diet, herbs, acumassage besides spiritual healing. Dietary practice is also based on the classification of foods as Yin (Cold) and Yung (hot) but the cold and hot designation do not necessarily relate to the temperature of the food. They believe a healthy diet consist of a mixture of Yin and Yung food. It is a practice in Kashmir to cook vegetable and meet, which is considered to be combination of Yin and Yung food. Excess of any kind of food is discouraged. It is also a practice in most of the Kashmir villages that post-natal mothers take Lactuca sativa (Handh) on 3rd day of delivery till 7th day. Similarly, when they take a bath on 7th day of delivery, which is a tradition in Kashmir, they boil water with many herbs and handh for long time, which is believed to be healthy for post natal mother. Females living in rural areas cook meat and handh, which is considered to be high protein and high calcium diet and combination of Yin and Yung food. Kashmiri Pandits take herb Yunga, when they cook any kind of River food and also use it during the festivals.

In most of the villages, Yin discussions are treated with Yung foods and Yung discussions with Yin foods such as meat and chicken are considered to be Yung foods. The classification of Yin and Yung foods is traditional and passed down through the culture.

Herbs are also used extensively for their various medical qualities. Many of them have been demonstrated to have a scientifically supported basis. Traditional medical practitioners are prescribing various combinations of herbs on the basis of diagnosis made on patients' symptoms and their own observations of patient's physiological functioning.

In villages, farmers and labourers after working hard for the day get their exercise and pain over by washing their feet with hot water and mostly they massage their feet and prefer hot fomentation. This job is done by their wives or attendants. The purpose of this hot massage and compression of feet is to restore the disturbed energy balance.

The Asian subculture has different names and techniques for these healing practices. Spiritual healing is also in practice in rural and sub urban areas in Kashmir. For minor ailments, like fever, headache, convulsions, jaundice and abdominal pain, they approach priests. They believe in transfer of energies from priest to patient by use of psychic energy. Spiritual healing often has different names and techniques in the varying subcultures, but all involve the transferring of healing energies from one person to another.

According to Madeline Leininger (an anthropogist), a sound rationale for studying transcultural health practice is to develop a greater understanding of human behaviour as it relates to health. By identifying traditional and contemporary health practice of varying cultures, communalities may emerge. Leininges believes that combining the knowledge pattern of transcultural practice with technological advances can result in improved health and nursing care for persons of many cultures. This transcultural nursing can focus caring practice of various cultures, as caring practices are the protecting and assisting activities that are related to health and are performed as a part of a culture.

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